

“manmadegod”
WITH

AMIR CHASSON
HAROUN HAWARD
GORKA MOHAMED
SOHEILA SOKHANVARI

PRIVATE VIEW 2nd of August 2012
3rd of August – 1st of September 2012

The group exhibition *manmadegod* features four artists working on issues related to the concept of the artist as creator, his/her relationship with the divine and the consequences of challenging this role. While most traditional exhibitions examining creation take a reverential or didactic position, this exhibition focuses on the absurdity of artistic practice and questions the authenticity of genius.

Exhibiting together for the first time, all four artists live and work in London but come from very diverse backgrounds, as far apart as Pakistan/UK, Iran, Spain/Iraq and Israel. As a consequence, the subtext of the exhibition is the subtle interrogation of historically and culturally specific forms of representation, re-interpreted through a universal contemporising prism. Each artist draws on his or her own ancestral visual language to inform their personal aesthetic whilst consciously steering away from ‘self-orientalising exoticisms’, thereby invalidating the simplistic stereotypes with which diasporic artists are so often charged.

Haroun Haward presents a piece that is the first in a series he is developing. Construed as a triptych, the first two panels acknowledge the artists’ Pakistani roots in comprising stylised paintings of Islamic prayer rugs from the Baluchistan region of Pakistan and Azerbaijan in Northwest Iran. But rather than faithfully recreating the original symbolism of this imagery, Haward’s stylised motifs and patterns are deliberately rendered in day-glo red and blue ‘Acid House’ colours that use a contemporary graphic design technique employed to catch the eye and to ‘flicker’. Switching cultural signifiers, the final panel is inspired by French artist Theodore Gericault’s *Officer of the Hussars*. Melding the two disparate visual traditions, the silhouette of the Officer and rearing horse are filled with details from the prayer rugs and a plethora of other sources defined in similar ‘Acid House’ blues and reds. In juxtaposing the hybrid images of the prayer rug and the soldier, Haward investigates the millennia old relationship between religion and war, and more broadly the immense power and effects of ideology and doctrine in a world in which East and West are struggling to redefine the global hegemony.

Enigmatic in title *Midnight Climax* (q.v.) and content, Soheila Sokhanvari’s work serves to confound and perplex the viewer. Perfectly-formed milky white miniature female naked sculptures provocatively exuding flowers from between their legs, together with drawings framed in traditional Persian miniature albums, Sokhanvari’s multi-legged stiletto and suspended swastika mandalas; a Murakami-esque milk sprouting Madonna and an erotic Egon Schiele figure

sandwiched incongruously between a 16th-century Persian nightingale and the monolith (from '2001: A Space Odyssey') take us on a journey from the sublime to the ridiculous. Executed in Iranian crude oil, 22-carat gold and lapis lazuli, the drawings on the one hand deliberately reference the symbolic materiality of Early Christian manuscript illumination in which the Virgin Mary was always depicted in a lapis lazuli blue robe and the use of gold denoted sanctity, whilst on the other, they draw us into the male oriented, private realm of the Persian court in which the role of god was usurped. Feeding off these opposed languages, Sohkhavarzi inverts the potency of the female form, catapulting the position of women in society from religious subservience to that of powerful sexual dominance.

Using painterly accumulations of bizarrely shaped dystopian figures, forms and objects, Gorka Mohamed refers us to the Spanish Baroque, even Goya's portraiture (*Boneless Character in a Mute Blue*, 2010, or *Franciscan Mechanism*, 2010). If Mohamed's paintings were theatre, they would belong unequivocally to the genre of the Theatre of the Absurd, characterised by Albert Camus' 1942 essay *Sisyphus* in which he defines the human condition as basically meaningless. By distorting and ridiculing this conventionalised, stereotyped imagery, the artist reflects on the things that affect us psychologically in our social-cultural reality and consequently by communicating more authentically, creates a catalyst by which to remedy the toxicity found in humanity. Or as Martin Esslin states when describing the dramatic equivalent "The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation."

Amir Chasson likes people, pattern making, jigsaw puzzles, bathroom tiles and the law of chance. Playing on happenstance, in *Nazis and Astronauts* (2011), he juxtaposes emblematic portraits of bad men (Nazis) with good men (American Astronauts), instruments of government and society, in alternating black and white and colour tiles (not of the bathroom type). Black for bad and colour for good we think, but no, confounding our expectations, Chasson cleverly subverts the order, so that good becomes black and white and we are left confused. Equally unresolved for the viewer and continuing the tile vocabulary, are the artist's paintings depicting the same male figure on two sides, with one unexplainably distorted (*A Whiff of Evidence*, 2011) or a mathematical or graphic shape on one side and an unknown caricature portrait on the other (*Ten Dimensional Tetrahedron*, 2011). Totally detached in form and meaning, the two halves of each unidentified and unidentifiable sit uncomfortably side by side. It seems the only logical conclusion for Chasson's is there is no conclusion (at least not one which the artist is about to give us) and that these images serve merely as semiotics for which any interpretation is possible. Yet despite this apparent nihilism, Chasson's work, like those of the other artists in the show, is underscored with humour and fun and by investing in these visual paradoxes, we as audience are ultimately investing in the paradox of life.

Written by Janet Rady

***manmadegod* runs from 3rd of August – 1st of September 2012
at ArtEco Gallery, London**

Information for journalists:

ArtEco Gallery

ArtEco Gallery is the conceptual brainchild of Kristin Hjellegjerde, serving as a creative outlet following the success of her art blog of the same name, established in 2010. After moving from New York to London, Hjellegjerde decided to establish the gallery in south west London in order to offer a fresh outlook for contemporary art in this part of the city. Based in Old York Road, the gallery seeks to showcase both emerging and established contemporary artists from a range of backgrounds in an intimate and personal environment. Previous exhibitions include the inaugural *After Munch*. For more information, visit www.artecogallery.com.

For further information and high-resolution images, please contact Kristin Hjellegjerde on khjellegjerde@mac.com.